

GANZ NOTES - TNS 11, 4 - The Infancy Narratives of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke (13 December 2022)

THE SYMBOLS OF THE GOSPELS

Every one of the four gospels was written from a certain point of view. Very often on stained-glass windows the writers of the gospels are pictured; and usually to each there is attached a symbol. The symbols vary but one of the commonest allocations is this.

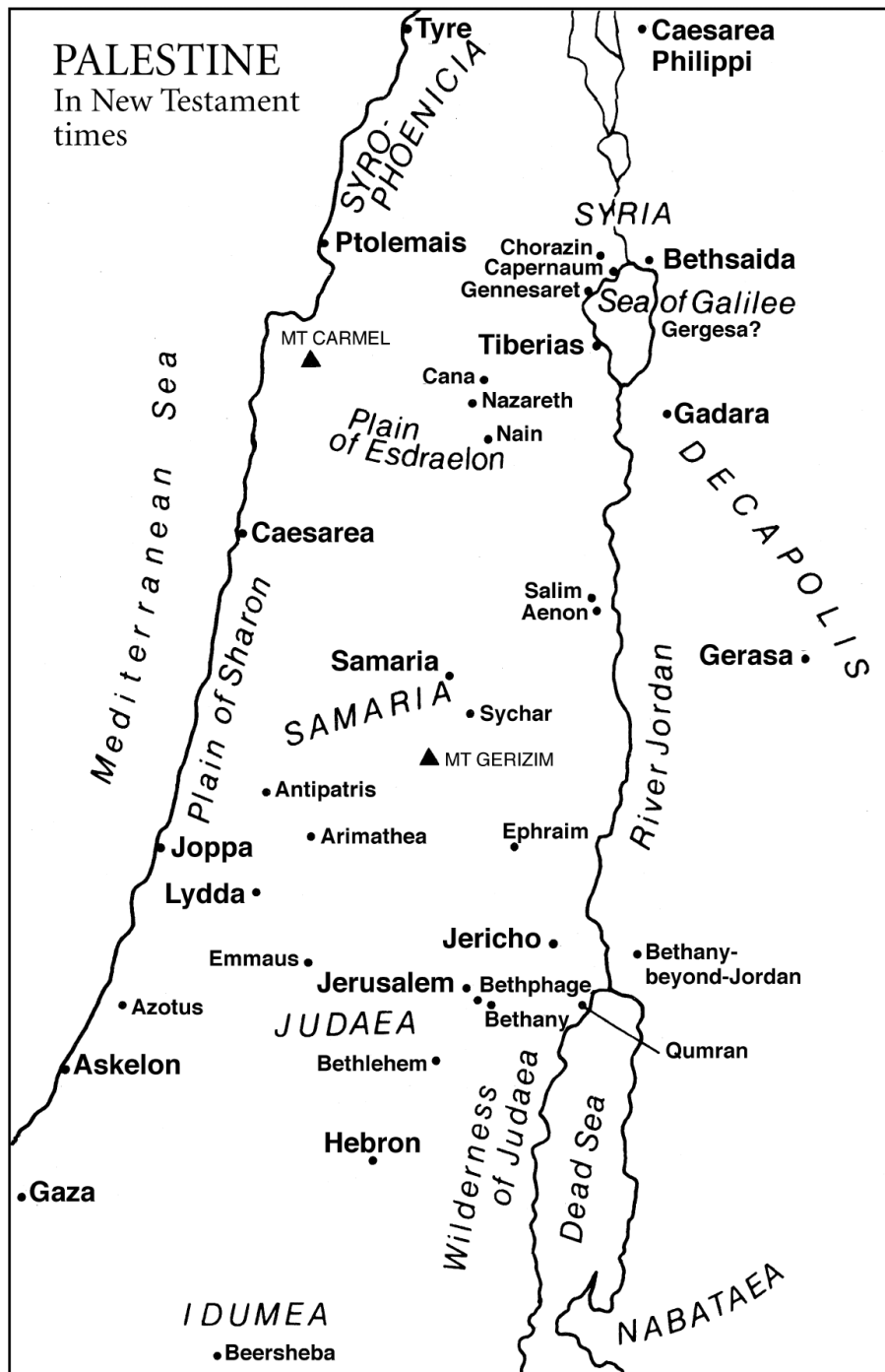
The emblem of **Mark** is a *man*. Mark is the simplest and most straightforward of the gospels. It has been well said that its characteristic is *realism*. It is the nearest to being a report of Jesus' life.

The emblem of **Matthew** is a *lion*. Matthew was a Jew writing for Jews and he saw in Jesus the Messiah, the lion of the tribe of Judah, the one whom all the prophets had predicted.

The emblem of **John** is the *eagle*. The eagle can fly higher than any other bird. It is said that of all creatures only the eagle can look straight into the sun. John is the theological gospel; its flights of thought are higher than those of any of the others. It is the gospel where the philosopher can find themes to think about for a lifetime and to solve only in eternity.

The symbol of **Luke** is the *calf*. The calf is the animal for sacrifice; and Luke saw in Jesus the sacrifice for all the world. In Luke above all, the barriers are broken down and Jesus is for Jew and Gentile, saint and sinner alike. He is the Saviour of the world.

William Barclay, [*The Gospel of Luke*](#), The New Daily Study Bible (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 2.



FR. RAYMOND BROWN, SS (1928-1998)

Two of the four Gospels, Matthew and Luke, begin with a story of Jesus' conception, birth, and childhood. Although coincidentally each consists of two chapters, the Lucan narrative is more than twice the length of the Matthean. The term "infancy narrative" is customary in English and will be used, even though inaccurate and inadequate.

Actually, only Matt 2 and Luke 2:1–40 describe Jesus' *infancy*, while the first chapter in each Gospel describes the period before Jesus' birth, and Luke 2:41–52 portrays Jesus at the age of twelve. As for *narrative*, one may well wonder whether the term is applicable to a series of short scenes with accompanying Scripture citations, such as we find in Matt 2:13–23.

Although they constitute a total of four out of eighty-nine Gospel chapters, the infancy narratives have an importance far greater than their length. They have offered abundant material for reflection both to Christian and non-Christian, to saint and skeptic. **For orthodox Christians they have helped to shape the central doctrine of Jesus God and man. On the one hand they leave no doubt that Jesus was the Son of God from the moment of his conception; on the other hand the portrayal of physical birth (plus the Lucan reference to the manger) has underlined the true humanity of Jesus' origins.** As a provocative Gospel subject for artists, storytellers, and poets, only the passion has rivaled the infancy narratives. Nevertheless, these narratives have also been a prime target for rationalistic scoffing. The frequent angelic appearances, the virginal conception, a marvelous star guiding magi from the East, a child prodigiously endowed with wisdom—to many these are patently legendary themes. In part, such a judgment reflects a general incredulity about the supernatural and the miraculous, an incredulity that is often just as unscientific as the credulity it replaced; but in part it reflects the observations of critical scholarship on historical problems in the infancy narratives.

Raymond E. Brown, [*The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke*](#), New Updated Edition. (New York; London: Yale University Press, 1993), 25–26.

THE INFANCY NARRATIVES

GOSPEL OF LUKE

N.T. Wright - "This particular volume opens up one of the most brilliant writings in early Christianity. Luke tells us that he had had a chance to stand back from the extraordinary events that had been going on, to talk

to the people involved, to read some earlier writings, and to make his own quite full version so that readers could know the truth about the things to do with Jesus. He was an educated and cultured man, the first real historian to write about Jesus. His book places Jesus not only at the heart of the Jewish world of the first century, but at the heart of the Roman world into which the Christian gospel exploded and which it was destined to change so radically." [Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), xii.]

The principal divisions of the Gospel according to Luke are the following:

- I. The Prologue (1:1–4)
- II. The Infancy Narrative (1:5–2:52)**
- III. The Preparation for the Public Ministry (3:1–4:13)
- IV. The Ministry in Galilee (4:14–9:50)
- V. The Journey to Jerusalem: Luke's Travel Narrative (9:51–19:27)
- VI. The Teaching Ministry in Jerusalem (19:28–21:38)
- VII. The Passion Narrative (22:1–23:56)
- VIII. The Resurrection Narrative (24:1–53)

New American Bible, Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Lk.

In this section, 1:5 - 2:52 (peculiar to Luke), we have our only information about the origins of John the Baptist and some unique information about the birth of Jesus. There are some notable parallels between the two birth stories. In both the angel Gabriel brought news of what was to happen, in both the circumstances of the birth and circumcision are narrated, and in both this is followed by prophetic utterances. Luke is bringing out the wonder of the Messianic age. Prophecy had ceased at the close of the Old Testament period; but now God was sending his Messiah and the prophetic gift was renewed. John is shown to have a special place in the Messianic happenings. There is no possibility of confusing him with the Messiah in Luke's account, for he is but the forerunner (1:17). But there is no possibility either of missing his true greatness. [Leon Morris, *Luke: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 3 of *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 84.]

The Gospel according to Luke is the first part of a two-volume work that continues the biblical history of God's dealings with humanity found in the Old Testament, showing how God's promises to Israel have been fulfilled in Jesus and how the salvation promised to Israel and accomplished by Jesus has been extended to the Gentiles. The stated purpose of the two volumes is to provide Theophilus and others like him with certainty—assurance—about earlier instruction they have received (Lk 1:4). To accomplish his purpose, Luke shows that the preaching and teaching of the representatives of the early church are grounded in the preaching and teaching of Jesus, who during his historical ministry (Acts 1:21–22) prepared his specially chosen followers and commissioned them to be witnesses to his resurrection and to all else that he did (Acts 10:37–42). **This continuity between the historical ministry of Jesus and the ministry of the apostles is Luke's way of guaranteeing the fidelity of the Church's teaching to the teaching of Jesus.**

Luke is concerned with presenting Christianity as a legitimate form of worship in the Roman world, a religion that is capable of meeting the spiritual needs of a world empire like that of Rome. To this end, Luke depicts the Roman governor Pilate declaring Jesus innocent of any wrongdoing three times (Lk 23:4, 14, 22). At the same time Luke argues in Acts that Christianity is the logical development and proper fulfillment of Judaism and is therefore deserving of the same toleration and freedom traditionally accorded Judaism by Rome (Acts 13:16–41; 23:6–9; 24:10–21; 26:2–23).

New American Bible, Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Lk.

It is clear that Luke wrote mainly for Gentiles. Theophilus was a Gentile, as was Luke himself, and there is nothing in the gospel that a Gentile could not grasp and understand. (1) As we have seen, Luke begins his dating from the reigning *Roman* emperor and the current *Roman* governor. The *Roman* date comes first. **(2) Unlike Matthew, he is not greatly interested in the life of Jesus as the fulfilment of Jewish prophecy. (3) He very seldom quotes the Old Testament at**

all. (4) He has a habit of giving Hebrew words in their Greek equivalent so that a Greek would understand. Simon the *Cananaean* becomes Simon the *Zealot* (cf. Luke 6:15; Matthew 10:4). *Calvary* is called not by its Hebrew name, *Golgotha*, but by its Greek name, *Kranion*. Both mean *the place of a skull*. He never uses the Jewish term *Rabbi* of Jesus but always a Greek word meaning *Master*. **When he is tracing the descent of Jesus, he traces it not to Abraham, the founder of the Jewish race, as Matthew does, but to Adam, the founder of the human race** (cf. Matthew 1:2; Luke 3:38). [William Barclay, [*The Gospel of Luke*](#), The New Daily Study Bible (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 3–4.]

GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

One of the great objects of Matthew is to demonstrate that all the prophecies of the Old Testament are fulfilled in Jesus, and that, therefore, he must be the Messiah. It has one phrase which runs through it like an ever-recurring theme: 'This was to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet.' That phrase occurs in the gospel as often as sixteen times. Jesus' birth and Jesus' name are the fulfilment of prophecy (1:21–3); so are the flight to Egypt (2:14–15); the slaughter of the children (2:16–18); Joseph's settlement in Nazareth and Jesus' upbringing there (2:23); Jesus' use of parables (13:34–5); the triumphal entry (21:3–5); the betrayal for thirty pieces of silver (27:9); and the casting of lots for Jesus' garments as he hung on the cross (27:35). **It is Matthew's primary and deliberate purpose to show how the Old Testament prophecies received their fulfilment in Jesus; how every detail of Jesus' life was foreshadowed in the prophets; and thus to compel the Jews to admit that Jesus was the Messiah.** [William Barclay, [*The Gospel of Matthew*](#), Third Ed., The New Daily Study Bible (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2001), 7.]

The opening chapters set the stage for the whole Gospel. Matthew, like Luke, begins with two introductory chapters of infancy narratives. The differences between the two accounts indicate that they did not share the same sources for this portion of the story. Matthew tells the story of Jesus' origins, the unusual circumstances surrounding his birth, and the threat to Jesus' life by Herod from the

perspective of Joseph. Luke, in contrast, makes Mary central. Beginning with the infancy narratives, Matthew calls attention to the fulfillment of Scripture through Jesus' life and ministry. In the opening two chapters he highlights Jesus' Davidic descent and presents Jesus as recapitulating in his own life important events in the history of Israel. Matthew then situates Jesus in relation to John the Baptist, followed by his account of Jesus' testing in the desert in preparation for his public ministry. [Barbara E. Reid, "[The Gospel according to Matthew](#)," in *New Testament*, ed. Daniel Durken, *The New Collegeville Bible Commentary* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), 7.]

The main interest of Matthew is in the Jews. Their conversion is especially near and dear to the heart of its writer. When the Syro-Phoenician woman seeks his help, Jesus' first answer is: 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel' (15:24). When Jesus sends out the Twelve on the task of evangelization, his instruction is: 'Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel' (10:5–6). Yet it is not to be thought that this gospel by any means excludes the Gentiles. Many are to come from the east and the west to sit down in the kingdom of God (8:11). The gospel is to be preached to the whole world (24:14). And it is Matthew which gives us the marching orders of the Church: 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations' (28:19). It is clear that Matthew's first interest is in the Jews, but that it foresees the day when all nations will be gathered in. [William Barclay, [The Gospel of Matthew](#), Third Ed., *The New Daily Study Bible* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2001), 7.]

The principal divisions of the Gospel according to Matthew are the following:

- I. **The Infancy Narrative (1:1–2:23)**
- II. The Proclamation of the Kingdom (3:1–7:29)
- III. Ministry and Mission in Galilee (8:1–11:1)
- IV. Opposition from Israel (11:2–13:53)
- V. Jesus, the Kingdom, and the Church (13:54–18:35)
- VI. Ministry in Judea and Jerusalem (19:1–25:46)
- VII. The Passion and Resurrection (26:1–28:20)

New American Bible, Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Mt.

In the first of the episodes of the infancy narrative that follow the genealogy, the mystery of Jesus' person is declared. He is conceived of a virgin by the power of the Spirit of God (Mt 1:18–25). The first of the gospel's fulfillment citations, whose purpose it is to show that he was the one to whom the prophecies of Israel were pointing, occurs here (Mt 1:23): he shall be named Emmanuel, for in him God is with us.

The announcement of the birth of this newborn king of the Jews greatly troubles not only King Herod but all Jerusalem (Mt 2:1–3), yet the Gentile magi are overjoyed to find him and offer him their homage and their gifts (Mt 2:10–11). **Thus his ultimate rejection by the mass of his own people and his acceptance by the Gentile nations is foreshadowed.** He must be taken to Egypt to escape the murderous plan of Herod. By his sojourn there and his subsequent return after the king's death he relives the Exodus experience of Israel. The words of the Lord spoken through the prophet Hosea, "Out of Egypt I called my son," are fulfilled in him (Mt 2:15); if Israel was God's son, Jesus is so in a way far surpassing the dignity of that nation, as his marvelous birth and the unfolding of his story show (see Mt 3:17; 4:1–11; 11:27; 14:33; 16:16; 27:54). Back in the land of Israel, he must be taken to Nazareth in Galilee because of the danger to his life in Judea, where Herod's son Archelaus is now ruling (Mt 2:22–23). **The sufferings of Jesus in the infancy narrative anticipate those of his passion, and if his life is spared in spite of the dangers, it is because his destiny is finally to give it on the cross as "a ransom for many" (Mt 20:28).** Thus the word of the angel will be fulfilled, "... he will save his people from their sins" (Mt 1:21; cf. Mt 26:28).

New American Bible, Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Mt.